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ABSTRACT

The study of popular music can be an effective method of examining social and cultural life. Popular music emphasizes the variety of human existence, goals, outlooks, and biases. A pervading theme in popular American music between 1959 and 1984 has been the theme of "America." Over 200 songs reflect personal, social, and political concerns about the United States. A list of many of these songs is divided into categories of American lifestyles, American music, famous Americans, patriotism, and social statements and problems. The latter category is subdivided into music on adolescence, politics, urban life, women's awareness, Black awareness, automation/technology, religious awareness, voting, Indian awareness, ecology, anti-war issues, and society in general. The list includes publication date, record company, and recording artist for all songs. An activity designed for secondary school students involves small groups in analyzing a number of songs to determine theme, audience, major issues, fact vs. opinion, present-day relevance, and making a class presentation of findings. Guide questions and a chart are provided for the students. (LP)

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# HISTORY OF AMERICA:
# A POPULAR MUSIC APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

William H. Cartwright maintains that one of the major objectives for teaching American history is its use as a guide to social action. He claims that the application of knowledge acquired through history enables man and woman to civilize themselves and improves the lot of humanity.[1] A way in which to study American history as a social guide to understanding and to vitalize the teaching of the human experience in the classroom is to reflectively examine social questions and issues through the context of popular music. B. Lee Cooper, in discussing the importance of social studies instruction for the development of student abilities "to anticipate, understand, direct, evaluate, and live with constant social change,"[2] maintains:

> The study of contemporary society demands that both teacher and student acknowledge their myopic tendencies and actively seek new methods and materials for investigating shifts and alterations in present-day life. One potentially beneficial resource for analyzing the causes and effects of social change is the medium of popular music. If a social studies teacher is seeking to test his or her students' abilities in utilizing skills such as problem identification, information gathering, hypothesis formulating, and decision-making, then the use of popular music should provide a rich field for classroom experimentation.[3]

This paper discusses (1) uses of popular music as historical and contemporary documents for classroom use, (2) the

lyrical content and the treatment of the theme "America" in popular music, and (3) a student activity using popular music.

## POPULAR MUSIC AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

Popular music can be an effective document to illustrate the various experiences of social and cultural life. Popular music emphasizes the variety of human existence that affects men and women's living and behavior, such as their goals, aspirations, reasons for taking actions, outlooks, bias, and frames of reference involving their political, economic, social, religious, scientific, esthetic, and intellectual life. In 1934, Sigmund Spaeth made the following statement in regards to the importance of popular music as a historical source:

> The popular song has become a most revealing index to American life in general. It sums up the ethics, the habits, the slang, the intimate character of every generation, and it will tell as much to furture students of current civilization as any histories, biographies, or newspapers of the time.[4]

Hugo A. Keesing, discussing popular music as a source for understanding American culture, writes, "During the past three decades popular music, especially its lyrical content, has been the object of widespread research by people who regard it as a cultural barometer and hear in it the voice of America."[5] Elsewhere, he asserts:

> Music, when viewed over time, has mirrored

> changes in much the same way that the popular press, films and television have. Its advantage over the others is that it has responded more quickly, at a lower cost, and has problably reached more of the young people who are likely to be in the forefront of change. By exploring fads, teenage concerns, social issues and every other imaginable topic, PM /popular music/ fills in much of the background that traditional historians ignore. Pop songs can serve as a catalyst to understanding the evolution of our culture. There is a fasinating history in those grooves.[6]

John Anthony Scott claims that folk songs, a form of popular music, are primary historical documents that "provide firsthand information about human experience at any given historical moment."[7] He goes on to state:

> Virtually every aspect of human life is dealt with in these songs. They are, in effect, the story behind the headlines, the history of humanity that is screened from the student's view by the textbook's dull recitation of battles, elections, treaties, constitutional enactments, and territorial acquisitions.[8]

At an annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians and in an interview for The Chronicle of Higher Education, William Graebner, a professor of history at the State University of New York College at Fredonia, explained why he teaches a course in the history of rock-and-roll music:

What I find most exciting about working with history is seeing a "document" in its context, whether it's a Presidential address or a piece of rock music. I'm fasinated by how any such document grows out of its particular time and era, and I suppose it is that sense that I want to communicate to my students, to enable them to see themselves as people in history, to realize that what happens today is part of an era. What I try to do is get the students to see their music as historical document, with historical sense and meaning.

Also, this course is a good way to simply teach them a lot about what happened in the United States since 1945, whether it is McCarthyism or Cuba, or civil rights, the women's movement, Watergate, whatever. There's no real difficulty in bringing all of these things in and showing how they are reflected in rock music in one way or another. One of my objectives is to teach the subject matter - the history of rock music - but another is to teach the discipline itself, to teach historical reasoning.9

THE THEME "AMERICA" IN POPULAR MUSIC

A prevading theme throughout the history of popular music, in particular from 1959 to 1984, has been the changing theme of "America." During that time span, over 200 songs, mostly rock-and-roll and country-western, have reflected various

personal, social, and political concerns about America. From "fun sub-themes" about fast cars, high school days, boy and girls relationships, and dances, to various "serious sub-themes" reflecting a growing discontent with the mainstream of the American way of life, these songs provide a historical yardstick in which to measure, extract, and identify knowledge, examples, meanings, and insights about various and diverse issues and events manifested in American society.

Assembled below are six sub-themes about America. Each sub-theme will have a brief definition followed by a time line of songs that deal predominantly with the sub-themes. This listing is not definitive.

A. Fun Sub-theme - this sub-theme is summarized by songs that deal with a "Happy Days-American Graffiti" life style approach with fast cars, good times, parties, girl-boy puppy love relationships, and good old high school days.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1959 | "High School U.S.A." (45 rpm) | Tommy Facenda (Atlantic 2071) |
| 1963 | "Surfin' U.S.A." (Surfin' U.S.A.) | The Beach Boys (Capitol 1890) |
| 1964 | "All American Girl" (45 rpm) | Freddy Cannon (Warner 5409) |
| 1964 | "Hot Rod U.S.A." (45 rpm) | The Rip Cords (Columbia 43035) |
| 1966 | "All American Girl" (45 rpm) | Ronny & The Daytonas (RCA 47-8896) |
| 1967 | "All American Girl" (45 rpm) | The Hondells (Mercury 72563) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1974 | "Somewhere U.S.A." (Sundown) | Gordon Lighfoot (Reprise 2177) |
| 1977 | "All American Man" (Kiss-Alive II) | Kiss (Casablanca 7076-2) |
| 1979 | "Somewhere In America" (45 rpm) | Survivor (Scotti Brothers 511) |
| 1980 | "Hello America" (On Through The Night) | Def Leppard (Mercury 1-3828) |

B. Music Sub-theme - this sub-theme is summarized by songs that deal with the American style of music in general.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1961 | "Twistin' U.S.A." (45 rpm) | Chubby Checker (Parkway 811) |
| 1973 | "American Pie" (American Pie) | Don McLean (Liberty 10037) |
| 1973 | "We're An American Band" (We're An American Band) | Grand Funk Railroad (Capitol 11207) |
| 1978 | "I Love America" (A Night At Studio 54) | Patrick Juvet (Casablanca 2-7161) |
| 1982 | "American Music" (45 rpm) | The Pointer Sisters (Planet 13485) |
| 1983 | "American Pop" (45 rpm) | The Manhatten Transfer (Atlantic 7-89720) |
| 1983 | "(You Can Still) Rock in America" (45 rpm) | Night Ranger (MCA 52305) |

C. Biography Sub-theme - this sub-theme is summarized by songs that eulogize various people.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1958 | "The All American Boy" (45 rpm) (Elvis Presley) | Bobby Bare (Bill Parsons) (Fraternity 835) |
| 1970's(?) | "Son Of America" (Son Of America) (John Wayne) | Seemon & Marijke (A&M 4309) |

D. Traditional/Patriotic Sub-theme - this sub-theme is characterized by traditional patriotic songs in a rock version.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1959 | "God Bless America" (45 rpm) | Connie Francis (MGM 12841) |
| 1969 | "Star Spangled Banner" (Woodstock) | Jimi Hendrix (Cotillion 3-500) |
| 1972 | "America, The Beautiful" (A Message From The People) | Ray Charles (ABC 755) |
| 1975 | "America, The Beautiful/ The Times, They Are A'changing" (Spirit Of '76) | Spirit (Mercury 2-804) |
| 1975 | "The Star Spangled Banner" (Spirit Of '76) | Spirit (Mercury 2-804) |

E. Patriotic/Pro-American Sub-theme - this sub-theme is summarized by songs which present America in a very positive vain by accepting as best choice the democratic-freedom way of life. For those who challenge the mores of mainstream America, the cry goes forth: "Love it, or Leave it!"

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1959 | "Back In The U.S.A." (The Great Twenty-Eight) | Chuck Berry (Chess 8201) |
| 1961 | "God, Country, And My Baby" (45 rpm) | Johnny Burnette (Liberty 55379) |
| 1963 | "Only In America" (Jay and The Americans Greatest Hits) | Jay and The Americans (United Art. 6453) |
| 1963 | "A-M-E-R-I-C-A" (45 rpm) | Trini Lopez (Reprise 20168) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1960's(?) | "My Land Is A Good Land" ('Bout Changes & Things) | Eric Andersen (Vanguard 9206) |
| 1960's(?) | "Hey America" (45 rpm) | James Brown (King 13778) |
| 1970 | "America, Communicate With Me" (45 rpm) | Ray Stevens (Barnaby 2016) |
| 1970 | "Back In The U.S.A." (Back In The U.S.A.) | MC5 (Atlantic 8247) |
| 1971 | "An American Trilogy" (Frisco Mabel Joy) | Mickey Newbury (Elektra 74107) |
| 1972 | "An American Trilogy" (45 rpm) | Elvis Presley (RCA 447-0685) |
| 1972 | "The Fightin' Side Of Me" (The Best Of Merle Haggard) | Merle Haggard (Capitol 11082) |
| 1972 | "Mother America" (45 rpm) | Ides Of March (RCA 0850) |
| 1973 | "Americans" (45 rpm) | Byron MacGregor (Westbound 222) |
| 1974 | "Promised Land" (45 rpm) | Elvis Presley (RCA 10074) |
| 1974 | "Mother Country" (You're Gonna Love Yourself In The Morning) | Bonnie Koloc (Ovation 14-38) |
| 1975 | "Philadelphia Freedom" (45 rpm) | The Elton John Band (MCA 40364) |
| 1976 | "Free In America" (Free In America) | Ben Sidran (Arista 4081) |
| 1977 | "Rockin' In The U.S.A." (Kiss - Alive II) | Kiss (Casablanca 7076-2) |
| 1978 | "Take It Where You Find It" (Wavelength) | Van Morrison (Warner 3212) |
| 1978 | "Back In The U.S.A" (45 rpm) | Linda Ronstadt (Asylum 45102) |
| 1980 | "In America" (45 rpm) | The Charlie Daniels Band (Epic 15-02154) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1980 | "America" (45 rpm) | Neil Diamond (Capitol 4994) |
| 1983 | "American Made" (45 rpm) | Oak Ridge Boys (MCA 52179) |

F. Social Statements/Ills Sub-theme - this sub-theme is summarized by songs that reflect a discontent with various social or political events or issues taking place or need to be changed in America. Many of these songs call for action to redress these problems and in some they call for a major change or a reconstruction of American society based on some new "humanistic" value system.

1. Adolescence

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1981 | "Kids In America" (45 rpm) | Kim Wilde (EMI 8110) |
| 1982 | "American Heartbeat" (45 rpm) | Survivor (Scotti Brothers 03213) |
| 1983 | "The Kid's American" (45 rpm) | Matthew Wilder (Private I 04363) |

2. Politics

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1968 | "Living In The U.S.A." (Sailor) | The Steve Miller Band (Capitol 2984) |
| 1974 | "Young Americans" (45 rpm) | David Bowie (RCA 10469) |
| 1977 | "I'm So Bored With The U.S.A." (The Clash) | The Clash (Epic 36060) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1979 | "The Man Who Built America" (The Man Who Built America) | Horslips (DJM Records 20) |
| 1982 | "The American Dream" (45 rpm) | Hank Williams, Jr. (Warner 0442) |

3. Urban Life

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1972 | "American City Suite" (45 rpm) | Cashman and West (Dunhill 4324) |
| 1978 | "American Love Affair" (Life In The Foodchain) | Tonio K (Full Moon 35545) |

4. Women Awareness

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1977 | "Miss America" (The Grand Illusion) | Styx (A&M 4637) |
| 1981 | "All American Girls" (45 rpm) | Sister Sledge (Cotillion 46007) |

5. Black Awareness

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1968 | "This Is My Country" (This Is My Country) | The Impressions (Curtom 8001) |
| 1970 | "American Woman" (American Woman) | The Guess Who (RCA 4266) |
| 1971 | "An American Trilogy" (Frisco Mabel Joy) | Mickey Newbury (Elektra 74107) |
| 1972 | "An American Trilogy" (45 rpm) | Elvis Presley (RCA 447-0685) |
| 1972 | "Sail Away" (Sail Away) | Randy Newman (Reprise 2064) |

6. Automation/Technology

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1980 | "Rock America" (Rock America) | Nick Gilder (Casablanca 7243) |

7. Ecology

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1978 | "Song For America" (Two For The Show) | Kansas (Kirshner 35660) |

8. Indian Awareness

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1966 | "My Country 'Tis Of Thy People You're Dying" (Little Wheel Spin And Spin) | Buffy Sainte-Marie (Vanguard 9211) |

9. Religious Awareness

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1980 | "Jesus Children Of America" (Innervisions) | Stevie Wonder (Motown 3-47.086) |
| 1982 | "The American Dream" (45 rpm) | Hank Williams, Jr. (Warner 0442) |

10. Voting

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1972 | "Come Home America" (45 rpm) | Johnny Rivers (United Artists 50960) |

11. Anti-War (Anti-Vietnam)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1963 | "With God On Our Side" (Joan Baez In Concert/Part 2) | Joan Baez (Vanguard 2123) |
| 1967 | "The American Eagle Tragedy" (The Great American Eagle Tragedy) | Earth Opera (Elektra 74038) |
| 1968 | "Save The Country" (New York Tendaberry) | Laura Nyro (Columbia 9737) |
| 1969 | "Volunteers" (Volunteers) | Jefferson Airplane (RCA 3867) |
| 1970 | "Save The Country" (45 rpm) | The 5th Dimension (Bell 895) |
| 1970 | "Monster" (Sixteen Great Performances) | Steppenwolf (ABC 4011) |
| 1970 | "American Woman" (American Woman) | The Guess Who (RCA 4266) |
| 1970 | "The American Ruse" (Back In The U.S.A.) | MC5 (Atlantic 8247) |
| 1977 | "With God On Our Side" (The Best Of Manfred Mann) | Manfred Mann (EMI 11688) |

11. Society In General

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1963 | "This Land Is Your Land" (Moving) | Peter, Paul, and Mary (Warner 1473) |
| 1971 | "America's Great National Pastime" (The Best Of The Byrds) | The Byrds (Columbia 31795) |
| 1972 | "America" (Simon And Garfunkel's Greatest Hits) | Simon and Garfunkel (Columbia 31350) |
| 1972 | "America" (45 rpm) | Yes (Atlantic 2899) |
| 1972 | "Doin' Time In The U.S.A." (Comin' Thru) | Quicksilver Messenger Service (Capitol 11002) |
| 1973 | "Do You Remeber The Americans" (Down The Road) | Manassas (Atlantic 7250) |
| 1973 | "Red, White And Blue" (45 rpm) | Kyle (MGM 14545) |
| 1974 | "American Tune" (Live Rhymin') | Paul Simon (Columbia 32855) |
| 1974 | "What Made America Famous?" (45 rpm) | Harry Chapin (Electra 45893) |
| 1974 | "America" (45 rpm) | David Essex (Columbia 3-10005) |
| 1974 | "U.S. Blues" (45 rpm) | The Grateful Dead (Grateful Dead 45-03) |
| 1976 | "Bicentennial" (T Shirt) | Loudon Wainwright III (Arista 4063) |
| 1976 | "Proud To Be An American" (Young And Rich) | The Tubes (A&M 3222) |
| 1977 | "Just A Story From America" (Just A Story From America) | Elliott Murphy (Columbia 34653) |
| 1978 | "American Love Affair" (Life In The Foodchain) | Tonio K (Full Moon 35545) |
| 1979 | "Lady From The U.S.A." (Strange Man, Changed Man) | Bram Tchaikovsky (Polydor 1-6211) |
| 1979 | "American Squirm" (Labour Of Lust) | Nick Lowe (Columbia 36087) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1979 | "Breakfast In America" (Breakfast In America) | Supertramp (A&M 3708) |
| 1979 | "American Dreams" (American Dreams) | Rubicon (20th Century Fox 577) |
| 1983 | "A Little Good News" (45 rpm) | Anne Murray (Capitol 5264) |
| 1983 | "Pink Houses" (45 rpm) | John Cougar Mellencamp (Riva 215) |
| 1984 | "Burn In America" (Burn In America) | Riot (Quality Records 1008) |

STUDENT ACTIVITY USING POPULAR MUSIC

1. Divide the class into small groups of three to five students.
2. Assign one or more songs to each group.
3. Instruct each group to listen carefully to the song and be prepared to explain to the class the answers to the following questions:
    a. Who is the writer and the performer of the song?
    b. What is the topic of the song?
    c. To whom (or what audience) was the song addressed?
    d. What were the circumstances at the time the song was released?
    e. What was the purpose of the song?
    f. What issues, problems, or events are presented in the song?
    g. What points of view are revealed?
    h. What portion of the song is fact? What part is conjecture?
    i. How reliable is the information in the song?

j. What inferences, generalizations, and conclusions based on evidence can be drawn from the song?

k. Do any of the events, issues, or conclusions concern America today?

l. Where might the group find more information about the song and its content?

m. How might additional information differ from the content of the song?

n. In what ways is this song as a historical document important in understanding American society?

4. To assist the groups, place the following (or a similar) chart on the blackboard or overhead transparency:

| Date | Author(s) | Recipient(s) | Topic(s) | Purpose(s) | Fact(s)/Conjecture(s) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

5. As a culminating activity, instruct each group to conclude with a group presentation. The presentations should contain:

a. A summary of factual information contained in the group's songs about America.

b. An explanation of any inferences, generalizations, conclusions, and points of view found in the songs.

c. A statement of the group's points of view in regards to the other questions about the

songs. In particular, the group should address the question in what ways are the songs as historical documents important in understanding American society.

d. A class discussion in regards to the group's generalizations and conclusions about the various songs.

## CONCLUSION

> For the reality of what's happening today in America, we must go to rock-n-roll, to popular music. -Ralph Gleason, The American Scholar[10]

As an original historical source, popular music can be a revealing barometer of American life. It provides students with new insights and diverse points of view on a variety of social concerns in American history. Through the use of popular music, history becomes alive as students participate in human emctions, values and attitudes of the past. These human expressions provide history with color and excitement and link students directly to its cast of characters. Popular music used both as a historical resource and a teaching tool in the classroom can help students better understand and learn about the social diversities that affected America historically and, in turn, help students to understand, to appreciate, and to improve themselves and their society in the present and in the future.

This activity using popular music, in general, and the

theme "America", in particular, stems from the desire to help students to maximize autonomy by learning how to discover things for themselves and by using a methodology to draw and test their own conclusions separate of those already formulated by others including teachers, historians, and the ever present textbook. It is also the hope that students will be able to transfer the learning process from historical situations to their own present-day social dilemmas.

NOTES

[1]William H. Cartwright, "The Role of History Teaching in Citizenship Education," The High School Journal, 44 (December, 1960), p. p. 116.

[2]B. Lee Cooper, Images of American Society in Popular Music, A Guide to Reflective Teaching. Chicago. Nelson-Hall, p. 5.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Sigmund Spaeth, The Facts of Life in Popular Song. New York: Whittlesey House, 1934, pp. i-ii.

[5]Hugo A. Keesing, "Pop Goes to War: The Music of World War II and Vietnam." Paper delivered at the Ninth National Convention of the Popular Culture Association, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvannia, April 26-28, 1979, p. 1.

[6]Hugo A. Keesing, "Culture in the Grooves: American History at 78, 45 & 33 1/3 RPM." Paper delivered at the Eight National Convention of the Popular Culture Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 19-22, 1978, pp. 7-8.

[7]John Anthony Scott, The Ballad of America, The History of the United States in Song and Story. Carbondale, Illinois: Sourthern Illinois University Press, p. 425.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Paul Desruisseaux, "A Scholar Teaches History of Rock-and-Roll --and, in the Process, the Country's," The Chronicle of Higher Education (April 20, 1983), p. 5.

[10]As quoted in David Pichaske's A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and Culture in the Sixties. New York: Schirmer Books, 1979, p. xix.